

Hidden Brain Transcript

Kennon Sheldon

The transcript below may be for an earlier version of this episode. Our transcripts are provided by various partners and may contain errors or deviate slightly from the audio.

Shankar Vedantam:

This is Hidden Brain. I'm Shankar Vedantam. Religions tell us they have the key to our best lives. Advice columnists tell us how to solve problems in our relationships. And airport bookstores are stuffed with tomes on how to grow rich, manage our time better, and build effective habits. All these sources of counsel can teach us valuable skills, such as planning, patience, and perseverance. These can be vitally important to success. But in a world overflowing with useful advice, why do so many of us feel stuck? How is it even the very successful often feel like there is something missing from their lives? Why do so many people spend years wistfully thinking about choices they might have made? One answer to that problem? Many of us are leading lives that are misaligned with our own deepest values and preferences. This week on Hidden Brain, what psychology can teach us about living our most authentic lives.

When you are a kid, grownups ask you what you want to do when you are an adult. When you are a teenager, college counselors ask you what you want to study. Once you join the workforce, managers ask you what your goals are for the next few years. At every stage, we are really being asked the same question: What do you want to do with your life? At the University of Missouri, psychologist Ken Sheldon studies the science of knowing what to want, how to set your sights on targets that will actually make you happy if you achieve them. Ken Sheldon, welcome to Hidden Brain.

Ken Sheldon:

Hey, I'm happy to be here.

Shankar Vedantam:

I want to take you back to 1981, Ken. You'd just finished college and moved to Seattle. You wanted to become a musician. You started a band. How did it go?

Ken Sheldon:

Rock musicians can be kind of flaky and unreliable, and we were all in our 20s and everybody had different goals. Everybody was kind of self-centered and they might not have been committed the way we thought that they were, or maybe the

guitarist slept with the singer unexpectedly. There's a lot of things that can just get in the way of having a smoothly functioning unit. We just weren't able to make the agreements and follow through with them that we would've needed to make real progress.

Shankar Vedantam:

I understand that at one point you were recording songs for a radio song contest and things didn't quite go smoothly.

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah. I had recorded my tracks on the song that we were going to submit to this contest, and I left for a weekend hiking trip expecting that the bandmates would put their tracks down so we could send in the song the next Monday, and I got back and nobody had done anything. It was very disappointing. I remember walking in the rain, it was Seattle, wondering what to do next and coming to the decision that this is probably not going to give me a way to make a living and that music, or at least this particular band episode, was not going to work out, and that I needed to get serious about maybe something else.

Shankar Vedantam:

What happened to Ken, of course, has happened to millions of people. Maybe it's happening to you right now. You set your heart on something and then find the thing you wanted doesn't look anything like the thing you thought you wanted. So Ken did what lots of us do: he flailed around looking for something new. He signed up for a master's program.

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah, it was a program at Seattle University in existential phenomenological psychotherapy.

Shankar Vedantam:

Wow!

Ken Sheldon:

That's a lot of syllables, but it is a certain tradition within existential philosophy and counseling psychology. It's a legitimate approach to helping people and I was very interested in that program. Not so much because I wanted to become a therapist, but more because I've always just been very theoretically oriented and these were new ideas that I didn't understand, that seemed like they might be very relevant to this search for clarity, search for what to do with myself.

Shankar Vedantam:

Again, Ken was doing what lots of us do. We look to the outside world to give us answers to questions about what we should do with our lives. Ken's foray into existential phenomenological psychotherapy was short-lived. The answers he was looking for were not forthcoming.

Ken Sheldon:

I really enjoyed the year. My fellow classmates, we formed a tight cohort, we did things together. I learned a lot, and the main thing I learned was that I didn't think the answers I was looking for were going to come from that area of knowledge.

Shankar Vedantam:

So what did you do?

Ken Sheldon:

Well, I once again stopped doing that. I dropped out after the first year. And in the end, I felt kind of stuck. I was living in Seattle. The jobs I was working were not very well paying, very high status, but here I was a Duke graduate, maybe I should be doing better than that. So I was in a period of really, really not knowing what to do next.

Shankar Vedantam:

In addition to not knowing what to do next, Ken felt like he was not measuring up. He sensed the world expected more from him and his impressive college degree. He expected more from himself. He felt lost. Still looking for answers, he signed up for a workshop that was all the rage in the 1970s and early '80s. It was called the Erhard Seminars Training or EST training.

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah, the EST training was created by Werner Erhard. He's not a spiritual guru, he was actually a salesman who read a lot about optimal performance and communication and what is the mind and mind training classes. He tried them all and then he created his own version called the EST training. And it wasn't a spiritual thing, it was actually designed to train you to understand your own mind and to control it better.

Shankar Vedantam:

I understand that at one point you had this training with a 60-hour course spread across two weekends. Describe the course to me. What happened and what you learned and how it ended?

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah. Well, the way the training was set up, you'd be seated in a ballroom. They'd rent a hotel ballroom and they'd have chairs lined up, and so there would be two or 300 of you lined up in your chairs, and then the trainer would come out and there would be volunteers who would bring microphones to people to speak into when they wanted to say something. And the trainer led us through a variety of explorations, processes, activities designed to show us how our minds work and how they are currently not working, and training us to work them better.

Shankar Vedantam:

I understand the course guaranteed enlightenment at the end of the second weekend.

Ken Sheldon:

That's right. That was actually the thing that attracted me to it most. I wasn't sure that I needed a self-help training. But that promise of guaranteed enlightenment, I was fascinated to find out what that was going to be.

Shankar Vedantam:

And so what happened the second weekend?

Ken Sheldon:

Well, so we're on day four, it's Sunday of the second weekend and it's sort of building and building and you're getting closer and closer to the material that they really want to hit you with at the end. The moment of enlightenment was being told that this is it, you're already enlightened, there's only the present moment, this is it.

Shankar Vedantam:

I imagine this must have been something of a letdown for the 200 people in the hall.

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah, I mean it sounds like a bait and switch almost. So after the trainer told us this, people were like, "What do you mean, this is it? This isn't it."

Shankar Vedantam:

It's interesting, so in this period of your life, Ken, I think you went through what a lot of young people go through. You've just graduated college, you're trying your hand

at different things, you're throwing darts at the wall, nothing's really sticking. There must have been a period in your life when it must have felt quite discouraging. Did thoughts of self-doubt go through your mind at this time in your life?

Ken Sheldon:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. I would say that I've had a lot of self-doubt that I've struggled with, but a big part of the self-doubt involves the knowledge that it's only you who is making the choices in your life. And that's kind of scary. It's all up to me, and I wasn't sure that I was good enough to do what maybe I was capable of doing.

Shankar Vedantam:

Adrift and uncertain, Ken asked himself what he wanted from life. The band hadn't worked out. The master's program in existential phenomenological psychotherapy turned out to be a bad fit. The EST workshops were a letdown. Ken had always enjoyed science and big ideas. He decided to enroll in a PhD program in psychology. At first, this seemed like another mistake, but several years into the program, a teacher came along who changed the way Ken thought about the question of what he should do with his life.

Ken Sheldon:

This wasn't probably till my fourth year that Robert Emmons arrived, and I was a little bit adrift up to that point. But once Bob showed up, I recognized that the research he was doing was fascinating, that I really wanted to learn about it. And so what he was doing was a new approach to studying personality, where instead of giving people a trait questionnaire on how extroverted are you and how agreeable and so forth, he gave people a blank sheet of paper and he said, "Tell me what you're striving to do." And so there'd be, say, 15 blank lines and the participant would write down 10, 15, as many as they wanted, things that they're striving to do in their life. That really intrigued me because it's what I had been trying to do my whole life was figure out what to strive for.

Shankar Vedantam:

Observing how other people write down the things they were striving for gave Ken a crucial insight.

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah, it is a blank piece of paper and people write things down, and if you think about it, how do we know or how do they know they're writing good stuff down? Maybe they're just writing down what their mom told them or their friend told them or what society has told them. And so it was only thinking later about what is the meaning of these goal statements people are giving us that I started to wonder what if they're writing down the wrong things.

Shankar Vedantam:

The hard question, Ken realized, wasn't figuring out how to get where you were going, it was in figuring out where you wanted to go. When we come back, how to find the answer to that difficult question. You're listening to Hidden Brain. I'm Shankar Vedantam.

This is Hidden Brain. I'm Shankar Vedantam. Psychologist Ken Sheldon studies how we choose goals for ourselves. His research has found that we often select the wrong goals. That is, we point ourselves in directions that don't ultimately lead to lasting happiness. An important reason for this error is that people don't have a good sense of what will make them happy.

Ken Sheldon:

One of the main things we find is that people are not very good at all at knowing how achieving their goals will affect them. They can have a completely off-base feeling that this goal, if I finally get, it's going to make all the difference for me. But then when we actually come back and measure their happiness later on to see how it's been affected or not affected, we often find no change.

Shankar Vedantam:

One of the biggest reasons that you and others have found that people come up with the wrong goals is that we blindly follow voices in our society that tell us what we ought to want. I want to play you a famous clip from the 1987 movie Wall Street. Michael Douglas plays Gordon Gekko, a wealthy corporate raider who has some strong views about greed.

Gordon Gekko:

The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all of its forms, greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA. Thank you very much.

Shankar Vedantam:

Ken, today we might say that Gordon Gekko goes too far. But even if we are not willing to be as explicit as this, can you talk about some of the subtler ways in which society tells us that money and power and status are the ultimate barometers of a successful life?

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah, well, there's many ways. We're all immersed in a material consumer culture, which is trying to get us to buy things, click things, make more money so we can acquire status symbols. Not all of us fall for this. It depends a lot on the support and relations and connections that we have. But if you're not sure what to do and so many of these broader cultural messages are telling you to be greedy, you're pretty prone to at least give that a try to see if it works.

Shankar Vedantam:

Yeah, and I suppose another major way that many of us might end up pursuing the wrong things is that we choose goals set for us by other people in our lives. And very often these might be people whom we love, our parents, our teachers, our friends, people who say they want the best for us, but people who might not actually know what will make us happy. Do you hear that from your students as well, Ken?

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah, that's a very common complaint. College students are still trying to figure out what they want, perhaps independently of their parents. It's their first real opportunity to get away from their parents and explore on their own. And parents often have very firm ideas about what they want their children to do. It's not a bad thing. In many cases, they are good ideas, but ultimately parents are not in even as good a position as we are to experiment and find what we really want. Parents have goals of their own, they want to acquire the status of having a doctor as a child, and they sometimes can't separate that out from their love and concern for us.

Shankar Vedantam:

Some years ago you were approached by a law professor at Florida State University and Lawrence Krieger wanted to discuss a problem he was seeing among some of his law students. What did he tell you, Ken?

Ken Sheldon:

In his view, in law schools there's intense competition, there's grading on a curve, so that even if you learn almost all the material, you might still only get a C. You're trying to get the prestigious positions, you might end up accepting a job because it's the highest paying, even though once upon a time you might have thought you would've hated doing that type of job. So it can be really confusing for students. And Larry was trying to humanize legal education.

Shankar Vedantam:

I understand the two of you went on to co-author a number of studies involving law students and practicing lawyers. Tell me some of what those studies found.

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah, we've published several studies. Our first came out in 2004, we were able to track a sample of law students over their entire three-year career to see what changes occurred in their wellbeing and in their mental state. The first thing we found was something that had been shown before, that their sense of wellbeing really plummeted quite dramatically and their levels of depression went up quite a bit over the course of the legal career in ways that are more extreme and more concerning than in other professional education.

Another thing we found was that it was this paradoxical thing where the students who began with the most idealistic motivation tended to do well. They got good grades in their first year of law school, but that had a corrupting effect where being the highest graders, they became the highest status students and their values shifted in the direction of looking good, having status instead of helping others. And so their idealistic motivation turned into much more self-centered motivation over time.

Shankar Vedantam:

Here was a set of ideas to explain why people found it hard, why Ken himself had found it hard, to figure out what to do with his life. By the time a person is in their early 20s and is making important decisions about careers and relationships, they've had a good two decades of indoctrination. Indoctrination from the culture which tells them what's worth striving for and what is not. Indoctrination from parents and well-wishers who have told them what is high status and what is not. And indoctrination from schools that often take passion and enthusiasm for a subject and turn it into a race for grades, certificates, and academic honors.

The irony is the better one does at each stage, the harder it becomes to ask if you are actually doing what it is you want to do. Soon, the systems of carrots and sticks that guides us through adolescence and youth is now driving us through our careers. In one study of 6,000 practicing lawyers, Ken found that many of these professionals prioritize things that the world had decided should make them happy, often at the expense of things that actually made them happy.

Ken Sheldon:

We were looking at everything about lawyers that we could think of that might affect their wellbeing, that most people would think are most important. Like, how much money do they make? How high status is their job or did they make partner? But we also included these more psychological variables that we thought would be more important. Like, do they enjoy and believe in what they're doing? Do they feel like they're making a contribution to the world in what they're doing? What we found was that yes, in fact income correlated with happiness, but it was a pretty small effect, a surprisingly small effect. A much larger effect was their motivation

for doing the job. Was it something they wanted to do, they believed in it, they felt like they were contributing to the world by doing it? And that was a much larger determinant of how happy a person they were.

Shankar Vedantam:

So you've said that unhappy lawyers might represent an especially striking example of a widespread phenomenon, which is that these people are privileging extrinsic motivations over intrinsic motivations. What do you mean by those terms, Ken?

Ken Sheldon:

Intrinsic motivation is just doing something because you like to do it. It's rewarding, it's interesting. Doing it is its own reward. Extrinsic motivation is when you don't really like it, you don't like doing it, but you like what you get from doing it. So you're trying to get a reward from the behavior that'll only come after you're finished.

Shankar Vedantam:

I understand that you have done work with Ed Deci who conducted some of the earlier studies into the nature of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Tell me about what you did together.

Ken Sheldon:

Ed was one of the first people to show that not only is intrinsic motivation real, it really matters to be engaged and interested in what you're doing. He also showed that intrinsic motivation is kind of fragile. It can be spoiled pretty easily. He called that the undermining of intrinsic motivation.

Shankar Vedantam:

Ed Deci found that these two kinds of motivation had different sources of nourishment. Intrinsic motivation springs up from the inside. It's often shaped by interest and curiosity. Extrinsic motivation comes from the outside. Of course, by the time professionals have embarked on a career, they've had 20 or 30 years of carrots and sticks thrown at them by family, by teachers, and by the world. The experiments that Ed Deci ran show that even when people started doing an activity because of interest and curiosity, adding external rewards and punishments had the paradoxical effect of destroying intrinsic motivation.

Ken Sheldon:

And so we did these classic experiments showing that when you pay people to do something, it makes them not want to do it anymore. So if you're solving what should be a fun puzzle that almost everybody likes to do, but you're doing it

because you get a dollar for each correct solution, and then you're left alone in the room for a five-minute period and you can either do more puzzles or you can pick up a magazine. In that condition, you pick up the magazine or today you bring out your cell phone. On the other hand, the participants in his studies who were just told, "Hey, check out these puzzles, see if you like them." There was no mention of money. When they were left alone in that room, they kept on trying to do new puzzles, they retained their intrinsic motivation.

This has huge implications for how we get people to do things. Do we try to sort of bribe and coerce them using external rewards? I mean, sometimes that's necessary, but it's also very powerful medicine that can spoil an activity maybe for life for a person. Your child starts to take piano lessons and you increase their allowance when they practice a certain amount. That may keep them practicing for a while, but in the long run they're probably going to lose interest because they've lost touch with the inherently enjoyable part of playing the piano.

Shankar Vedantam:

You conducted a real-world study that has some remarkable findings. You're working of course at the University of Missouri, which has a very extensive athletic program. Some student athletes at the school are recruits whose tuition and expenses are paid for by athletic scholarships. Others are walk-ons who play just for the fun of it. So one group has a bunch of external incentives to play, the other primarily has internal incentives. Now you've studied these two groups of athletes and their long-term involvement with and enthusiasm for their sport. What did you find, Ken?

Ken Sheldon:

What we were trying to do was show intrinsic motivation undermining that lasts for decades, not just a few minutes. So Deci's early studies showed in that five-minute period, you wouldn't pick up the puzzle. What we wanted to see was during that four-year period of college, when you were getting everything paid for, did that ruin that sport for the rest of your life? What we found was that the varsity athletes up to 30, 40 years later were much less interested in playing the sport in the present day or even paying attention to what was happening in the sport, in the colleges or the professional leagues. Whereas the students who only participated as walk-ons originally retained their interest in the sport.

Shankar Vedantam:

I mean, that's such a paradoxical finding, isn't it? Because of course, the students who are the varsity players are being rewarded. They're being told, "We love how you play. We're going to give you these incentives to keep playing." It's really strange that these external incentives seem to damage people's internal drive or love for the sport.

Ken Sheldon:

Yes, it is strange. You would think that they're so good at the sport, they've spent so much time practicing it, they were able to earn a scholarship, they should be the ones who really continue to like it. The reason that they don't comes down to the fact that they felt very controlled during their college years. They felt like they had to do it, they'd lose their scholarship if they didn't. People were talking about them on the discussion boards, the fans were criticizing them, the coaches were bossing them around. And so when people feel controlled by their environment or their situation, that really tends to undermine their intrinsic motivation. And so as soon as it appears that it's okay to stop doing it, they're prone to go ahead and stop.

Shankar Vedantam:

I want to summarize where we are. If we want to know what to do with our lives, we need to examine our inclinations and propensities. We should try and hold at bay the signals we get from the outside world about what's truly important, but it turns out that doing these things may not be enough. In some ways, maybe we should go back to the days after you graduated from college. I think you were following your inclinations and propensities when you decided to become a musician. You were not following the dictates of money and power and status. Some of your research has focused on what may be the trickiest problem of all, which is we fail to understand ourselves because when we look inward, we can only see one aspect of our own minds. How so, Ken?

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah. I think this might be one of the most profound problems that we human beings face. The fact that we are kind of stuck in a psychological world that is sort of a simulation of what's going on underneath. We can only be conscious of a limited amount at any moment. And the things that we think and are conscious of can be very influenced by outside forces and pressures as we've discussed. And so it takes quite a bit of time and work to figure out what you really want to do.

Shankar Vedantam:

Some of this has to do with the fact that when most of us think about our own minds, we think that our minds are just our conscious minds. But some of your work has looked at the idea that a significant portion of our minds in fact are hidden away from conscious introspection.

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah, there's a large tradition in motivation research and in other areas of psychology that have sort of revived the idea of the non-conscious mind. Not saying that it's Freud's idea of the place where the nasty stuff is hidden. Instead, it's the place where we have habitual inclinations, emerging intuitions, motives that we kind of go after maybe even without our own awareness. And so it's pretty

important to learn to hook up the two minds as much as we can to get our conscious selves to accurately reflect what's going on in there at a deeper level.

Shankar Vedantam:

When we come back, how to figure out what's inside, well, your hidden brain? You're listening to Hidden Brain. I'm Shankar Vedantam.

This is Hidden Brain. I'm Shankar Vedantam. Psychologist Ken Sheldon studies how we come up with the goals that animate our lives. He's the author of *Freely Determined: What the New Psychology of the Self Teaches Us About How to Live*. Ken's research has found that happiness comes when we bring together the propensities and inclinations we are aware of with deeper preferences that lie in our unconscious minds. Ken, you have a name for this process of successfully matching our goals to our conscious and non-conscious inclinations and propensities. You call this self-concordance. What do you mean by this term?

Ken Sheldon:

Self-concordance is simultaneously a simple and a complex concept. People pursuing non-concordant goals are often doing something mainly because somebody else wants them to, somebody who's important to them. It could be parents, it could be a spouse. Other times, they are trying to be something that they themselves think they should be. They've got this idea maybe that goes way back in their lives of what kind of person they are and what they need to do to be that kind of person. The problem with both of these types of motivations is it makes it difficult to hear more subtle signals that are coming up from our non-conscious minds that might help us to realize that this isn't quite it yet.

Shankar Vedantam:

Of course, the things that are in our minds that are not consciously accessible to us are by definition not consciously accessible to us. So merely asking ourselves what our non-conscious minds are up to will not give us the answers. So your research has found that one way to get at what's happening in our non-conscious minds is to follow a path that artists, designers, and inventors take as they engage in the process of discovery. What are the steps in this process, Ken?

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah, this was a very interesting connection that occurred to me at one point because I used to study creativity. It was my dissertation research topic. And there's an important idea in creativity theory of the four stages of creativity that you start by asking yourself a question, you don't know the answer, you want the solution to the scientific problem or the new approach to painting that seems to be in there. Something intriguing is calling to you. So you ask yourself this question and you don't know the answer. And so then there needs to be an incubation period where

you go and think about something else.

What happens is that your non-conscious mind keeps working on the problem while you're thinking about something else, just because you sort of consciously posed that question to yourself and then you went away and now it's working on it. And so hopefully along comes a moment of inspiration, an aha moment where some stray thought or idea or image pops up and you recognize, "Whoa! That's interesting. What's that about?" And you start to work with that idea and you realize that it's the solution to the problem. So this is a very common sort of creative sequence. My idea was that maybe discovering what we really want is a creative activity and maybe we can self-prompt this activity. We don't just have to wait for insights out of the blue. We can consciously ask ourselves questions like, "Why am I so unhappy? What do I really want? What's bothering me? What's happening inside of me?" When we ask those questions, we don't know the answer right away, but very often we begin to get hints.

Shankar Vedantam:

Partly what I hear you saying is that this process of preparation is really important. It's important to actually try and grapple with the problem consciously, even if it turns out that the answer lies in our non-conscious minds. Because by grappling with something consciously, you're setting the stage, if you will, to have a conversation with your non-conscious mind and to allow something to bubble up.

Ken Sheldon:

That's exactly right. A colleague and I now are writing a review article where we're trying to make a firm connection between the phenomenology of conscious choice, of asking one's mind questions and neuroscience, what's happening in these brain networks when we do that? And we're finding some really striking points of connection supporting the idea that when we ask ourselves a question, it puts our brains to work in ways that we don't know about, but that can do an amazing job of helping us.

Shankar Vedantam:

So once a period of preparation has led to a moment of illumination, we then have to proceed to the stage you call verification. Is that right? Not every revelation we have will pan out.

Ken Sheldon:

That's true. Not every aha experience is the best or final aha experience. And so life is an experiment and then we need to test the idea once we become aware of it. And we might realize that no, we don't want to quit everything and move to Mexico and lay on a beach. That's not really going to be as fulfilling as we think. Let's keep thinking and maybe a better choice will come.

Shankar Vedantam:

In order to know what we really want, we need to get better at attending to subtle thoughts and feelings that many of us have spent lifetimes suppressing. Like many other skills, the ability to listen to yourself can be improved through deliberate practice. Ken says there are techniques that can help.

Ken Sheldon:

One of them is to use mindfulness meditation where you are just trying to do nothing. You're just being a blank conscious screen and you're trying to watch what pops up and you're trying to stay present and not being sucked away by the next thought or the next fear or emotion. And the usefulness of mindfulness for discovering what you really want is that you're learning how to notice these subtle signals that might be lurking on the fringe of consciousness. You might not recognize those until you develop this skill of really picking up on these subtle things that are happening if you'll just shut up and listen.

Shankar Vedantam:

Ken, in your book *Freely Determined*, you write about a character you call Amy. She's not a real person, but an amalgamation of many people you've worked with and you use Amy's story to illustrate your technique of getting to self-concordance. Set things up for me. Who is Amy and what is the challenge she faces?

Ken Sheldon:

As a college student, Amy was very influenced by a friend who encouraged Amy's interest in the environment and influenced Amy to join groups with her and work for the environment. So that was a big part of Amy's life in college. But then she went to law school and did very well, but she fell prey to this problem I described earlier that the high-performing law students tend to become corrupted by their success and she ended up as a wealthy partner, extremely successful by conventional standards lawyer working in a big firm in a big city. But she was miserable and she had no idea why at that point.

One weekend, she talked to her brother at a family gathering and his brother asked some difficult questions. "Well, if you're so miserable, why are you still doing this?" That caused her to start thinking in the way I've described. It set her unconscious mind into motion. The first effects of that process was when the thought of the woman that she knew back in college popped into her head one day at work, and it had been 25 years, why was she thinking of her now? She finally got to a point where she Googled that person and discovered that they ran their own consulting firm for environmental issues.

It took a while for Amy to go from this knowledge to saying, "Well, maybe I'll reach

out to her and see... I'll email her and see how she's doing." But when she finally got to that last point, the friend was very glad to hear from Amy, thought that Amy had skills that she needed and invited Amy to come work with her. And so Amy changed her job. She took a 50% cut in salary and she moved to a different city, but she's way happier now than she was before because she has gotten back to those early adult interests in making a difference in the world.

Shankar Vedantam:

In terms of the specific techniques that you mentioned a second ago, the idea of preparation, illumination, and verification, how does Amy's story represent those stages, Ken?

Ken Sheldon:

Nothing happened until she started to ask herself, "What's the problem? What do I really want?" And then nothing happened after that for quite some time because it was a big problem and it took a while for her non-conscious mind to process it, but then that mind found ways to bring to her attention this relevant image from her past. But she still needed to recognize the aha moment. And then she still needed to elaborate it and follow it through and contact her friend and so forth. But the whole sequence fits this model that we've discussed quite well.

Shankar Vedantam:

It's so interesting when you think about it, so few of us actually ask ourselves those big questions and those of us who do often don't listen to the voice of illumination that might pop up, and then those of us who do that might not actually stop to verify or elaborate it. And it really is several different steps and each of them is actually quite important.

Ken Sheldon:

Yes, it is true. They're all important and the process can be stalled anywhere along the way. One of the biggest problems Amy had was when she had this invitation to join her friend's company was making the cut from her old job because she knew that her old colleagues would see it as a step-down, working for so much less, so much less status. And so she needed to muster the courage to go ahead and take the step anyway.

Shankar Vedantam:

One of the subtle traps that you have studied is the idea that once we make choices, our minds are very good at coming up with reasons why those choices are in fact the correct choices. It becomes very difficult to actually evaluate the choice really on its own merits. Can you talk about that idea that there is a commitment that happens inside our minds once we've decided to go down path A rather than

path B?

Ken Sheldon:

Yes. Peter Gollwitzer in his great research has shown that at some point we cross a Rubicon of decision. What that means is we make up our minds. We're no longer thinking about what we might want. We've now made a choice and we're going to go ahead with it. What his research shows is that once we cross that Rubicon from deliberation to implementation, our minds operate very differently. We're no longer questioning what we're thinking. Instead, we're trying to make plans. We're trying to preserve the goal. We want to, we don't want to wimp out on it. We want to take the next step. We don't want to have to go back to that uncomfortable position of wondering what we want.

Shankar Vedantam:

In some ways, we become almost prosecutors. We are basically amassing evidence for a conclusion that we've already reached instead of having an open mind.

Ken Sheldon:

That's exactly right. We don't want to think that I chose the wrong thing. That creates dissonance, it's uncomfortable. And so we protect ourselves from that thought. Many times, that's a good thing. We don't want to let ourselves worry too much, we want to get on with things, but sometimes that dissonance can be a valuable signal as we've been talking about with Amy that can let us know that maybe it is time to go back to the deliberation phase.

Shankar Vedantam:

Once we take the time to really look inward and listen to the quiet voices within us, there is still an important hurdle to overcome. Just because Amy discovered what felt like her true calling doesn't mean that the rest of her life is going to be a bed of roses. Getting to self-concordance is a great way to harness the power of intrinsic motivation and to start to live your life in accordance with your deepest values. But changing course and making plans for a new life isn't enough. As boxing heavyweight champion and part-time psychologist Mike Tyson once said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

I played Ken a clip from the movie Wild. It's based on a memoir by Cheryl Strayed recounting her experiences hiking the Pacific Crest Trail. In this clip, Cheryl played by Reese Witherspoon, is hiking. She's carrying a very heavy backpack and starting to regret her choices.

Cheryl Strayed:

What do you like to do when you're not hiking, Cheryl? I like to sit on a real toilet

with flush. I like to cook food, eat food with other people. People, that's another thing I like. I like talking to people, listening to people. Funny, that's a hobby, one I hadn't even realized I had until I decided to walk on my own through the (beep) desert.

Shankar Vedantam:

The Pacific Crest Trail that we hear about in the movie, Ken, run some 2,600 miles from Mexico to Canada. You've studied the motivations of people who successfully complete the trail in a single spring/summer season. What do you find happens to their intrinsic motivation as the trail unfolds?

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah, this was a really interesting data. The most dramatic thing that happened was that their intrinsic motivation to do the hike plummeted over the course of the summer. It no longer seemed so interesting and challenging and fun at the end. Instead, it was much more of a kind of slog for most people who were able to go that far.

Shankar Vedantam:

You found that when intrinsic motivation wanes in this way, it can actually be replaced by something else, a different reason for pushing forward, but one that is still positive. It's called identified motivation. What is this, Ken?

Ken Sheldon:

Yeah. Identified motivation is the kind where it's not that you're doing it because it's fun and interesting. Instead, it's you're doing it because it's meaningful. It expresses your values and it's important to you. And so even when intrinsic motivation fails, identified motivation can still keep going because it believes in the journey, even if the journey is now becoming more and more painful.

Shankar Vedantam:

It's so interesting, a lot of this research I think speaks to the importance of mindfulness. So being willing to listen and pay attention to where you are and how you might really feel. I'm not quite sure it goes all the way back to that EST seminar that you did in your 20s, but to some extent, some of it is about really paying attention to where you are.

Ken Sheldon:

It's true, and that is something that we all need to know how to do better. It's something that our schools don't teach us, our parents don't teach us. We are self programming organisms. We are creating our lives via our choices, but we are not

taught how to do it well. Not taught how to ask ourselves the questions that will get us the answers that we need.

Shankar Vedantam:

Psychologist Ken Sheldon works at the University of Missouri. He's the author of *Freely Determined: What the New Psychology of the Self Teaches Us About How to Live*. Thank you so much for joining me today on *Hidden Brain*.

Ken Sheldon:

Thank you, and thank you for inviting me. I've had a great time.